

REPLY TO STEPHEN WHITE

HILARY PUTNAM

When I responded to Stephen White's deep and elegant lecture in Rome, I said that I agreed with his transcendental argument and I do. It is a profound contribution to the discussion of the epistemology and phenomenology of perception. And apart from one minor textual issue having to do with William James,¹ was so convinced by that lecture that I had no criticism to voice. But on a subsequent close reading of his paper, I have discovered an issue (one that he raises towards the end) where it seems that we do disagree, and it seems appropriate to explain that disagreement in this reply, although I don't want the fact that we disagree on a very subtle and complex issue to obscure the fact that I do find the central argument of his paper an important contribution.

The subtle issue in question has to do with supervenience. White sets up a complicated pair of examples. "In the first example," White tells us, "one is in perceptual contact with the external world in the usual way. One has, however, a duplicate in a virtual reality setup whose brain is molecule-for-molecule identical to one's own and is receiving the same electrical inputs. Suppose that in the duplicate's case the inputs are all completely artificial, and the duplicate is out of touch with the external world. In the second example, the source of the electrical inputs to one's own brain switches back and forth (seamlessly) between the real world and an artificial source. Suppose it does so in such a way that one has no idea that such switches are taking place. And suppose that when one is told about the switches, one has no idea when or how often they occur." And he continues:

Considerations stemming from Frege's constraint (together with the requirement that we say *how* it is satisfied in particular cases) suggest that we should opt for supervenience on what is intrinsic to the brain. The desire to do justice to the phenomenological fact that there is something it is like to have the experience one is having now—something shared by one's duplicate and the person-stages of oneself that are out of touch with the world—seems to point in the same

¹ In my book, *The Threefold Cord*, I said that William James showed that there is no good argument for the interface conception, and this statement is challenged in White's paper. I stand by it for the following reason: far from overlooking what White calls "modes of presentation" (in the case of direct perception), James recognizes them, and defends the radical claim that these are *aspects of the perceived public object*. (This may make him the first "disjunctivist".) There is a sense in which James convinced Russell, because Russell says in *The Analysis of Mind* that he has been won over by "the American new realists whose leader was William James". Ironically, the American new realists never *admitted* that they took their realism from William James. But, Russell knew very well where they got it.

direction. And yet if the arguments above are roughly correct, doing so can only be self-defeating. However, the nonsupervenience of our conscious experiences on the intrinsic features of events in the brain, together with their supervenience on the physical threatens to make facts about what it is like to have one's present experiences mysterious. And the nonsupervenience of such facts on the totality of physical objects, facts, and events makes it mysterious how we could ever get in touch with mental events. Thus it leads to apparently intractable problems with self-knowledge and knowledge of other minds—problems that generate their own versions of meaning skepticism.

“Having, in this way, encountered what looks like an antinomy—since all the alternatives (global supervenience, supervenience on brain-states, and denial of supervenience) supposedly have objectionable consequences—” White opts for saying that “this problem of supervenience cannot arise”. “Very briefly,” he continues, “the agential perspective and the objective-causal perspective are, on my view, incommensurable in the Kuhnian/Hansonian sense.”

I do not, however, find the antinomy genuine.² While it would take a book to explain in full why I think it isn't,³ I hope that I can briefly indicate the main points at which I disagree with this argument:

First, I do think that all of our capacities, including “agential” ones (a category which, as Stephen White correctly argues, includes our perceptual capacities), supervene on the states of the physical universe, including, in a great many cases, past as well as present ones. Stephen White scorns “naturalism”, but that, I think, is because he identifies “naturalism” with *reductive* naturalism (a mistake I have been guilty of making at times myself). When I am careful, I say that I am a naturalist—a non-reductive naturalist—and I don't see how any naturalist can deny global supervenience of human psychological states and capacities.⁴ (And appealing to the murky doctrine of “incommensurability” is no help.) But there is no one simple answer to the question of whether our agential capacities are *locally* supervenient (supervenient on just the relevant brain-states) or *globally* supervenient (supervenient on factors external to the brain, and even to the organism), because *it depends on which agential capacities one is talking about*, even if we restrict the issue to perceptual capacities.

To see what I mean, let me mention a bit of science fiction of my own—a variant of Ned Block's idea of “Inverted Earth”. In Block's scenario,⁵ the sky on Inverted Earth

² By the way, I have always found the Kuhnian notion of incommensurability seriously confused.

³ Hilla Jacobson and I are engaged in writing a book on perception which will discuss these, among other, topics.

⁴ There are, however, misuses of the notion of supervenience, particularly by reductionist philosophers. On this see, my “The Uniqueness of Pragmatism”, *Think*, Autumn, 2004, pp. 89-205.

⁵ Block, Ned, 1990: “Inverted Earth”, in James Tomberlin (ed.) *Philosophical Perspectives*, 4, *Action Theory and Philosophy of Mind*, Atascadero, Ridgeview, 53-79.

was supposed to be yellow, the grass was supposed to be red, etc. But to an immigrant who has been provided with color-inverting lenses (and whose body pigments are changed) everything would seem as it does on earth, although, unknown to the immigrant (who was brought to Inverted Earth as a small child) his neighbors have visual “qualia” which are the opposite of his. In my version (constructed for a seminar on perception that I taught recently), there is no immigrant and the natives of Inverted Earth have naturally evolved neural systems that act like color-inverting lenses. In this version, the sky looks to Inverted Earthers the very same way our sky looks to us, but it is “really” yellow, etc., and the “correction” to the sky’s color (by the visual system of the Inverted Earthers) is the result of the evolution of their visual system, not the insertion of anything artificial. The purpose of my thought-experiment was to make it clear that the same quale (the one we call the sensation of blue) could have the biological function of representing the presence of a quite different color.

Now, in order to discuss White’s problem about supervenience, I want to use a combination of the two scenarios. Let Jim, who is one of us “Earthers”, be transported to Inverted Earth, but without being aware of the differences. And suppose Jim to be fitted with clever contact lenses that switch colors with their complementary colors (without his being aware that this has been done), so that the colors of objects on Inverted Earth look “normal” to him. It is dark and rainy for several hours, and then the sun comes out, and Jim’s Inverted Earth friend Betty says, “Look at that blue sky!”, and Jim responds enthusiastically, “Yes, it’s a heavenly blue”. Since Jim is speaking Earth English and Betty is speaking Inverted Earth English,⁶ Jim is actually wrong (the sky is yellow, not blue) and in agreeing with Betty, he is agreeing to an incompatible description of the sky, since Betty means that the sky is yellow—at least yellow (I am, of course, using Earth language here) is the color it is the function of the Inverted Earth-English word “blue” to pick out. By Frege’s constraint, there must be a relevant difference in the mode of presentation of the sky to Jim and to Betty, to account for the fact that Jim, without being mentally disturbed, etc., has just accepted two incompatible statements about the color of the sky. And there is: Jim is seeing the sky through color-switching lenses. But this is not a difference in the *brain-states* of Jim and Betty (as far as their visual systems are concerned). So in this case, Frege’s constraint should lead us to say that the mode of presentation of the color of the sky is supervenient on the brain-state *plus* something external to the brain: the presence of contact lenses, in Jim’s case. If the mode of presentation depended only on the state of the visual cortex, it would be the *same* for Betty as for Jim, and the acceptance (unawares) of incompatible beliefs by Jim would not have a Fregean explanation.

⁶ The only difference between the two languages is that in Earth English the word “blue” refers to the color blue, and in Twin Earth English it refers to yellow. But neither Jim nor Betty know this, and the phenomenal character of Betty’s experiences of what she calls “blue”, i.e., her experiences of yellow things, such as the Inverted Earth sky, matches the phenomenal character of Jim’s experiences of what *he* calls “blue”, such as his experiences of the Earth sky, prior to his visual system’s being altered.

I believe, however, that both Betty and Jim are capable of introspecting the visual quality of their sensation (which *is* the same) when they look at the sky. In this case, the mode of presentation is the same, and it may well be that it is only “locally” supervenient. But in the case of a presentation of a public property or a public object, I do not see Frege’s constraint as driving us to reject global supervenience at all.

Armed with these observations, let me return to Stephen White’s thought-experiments. We recall that White wrote: “Considerations stemming from Frege’s constraint (together with the requirement that we say *how* it is satisfied in particular cases) suggest that we should opt for supervenience on what is intrinsic to the brain. The desire to do justice to the phenomenological fact that there is something it is like to have the experience one is having now—something shared by one’s duplicate and the person-stages of oneself that are out of touch with the world—seems to point in the same direction. And yet if the arguments above are roughly correct, doing so can only be self-defeating.” My response is that *phenomenal* character (“what it’s like”) is, indeed, supervenient on “what is intrinsic to the brain”, but that what we are aware of, and that in many cases includes “modes of presentation”, is usually not. That what we are aware of is a function of our “quale” is the essential tenet of classical empiricism, but that tenet is, I believe quite wrong. (And countering that error by denying the existence of qualia altogether is also wrong.) Awareness of public objects and properties (e.g., Betty’s and Jim’s awareness of the color of their respective skies, when they are on their respective home planets) is mediated by object involving capacities. Those capacities are functional states in a non-reductive sense of “functional states”, and they have long arms; they reach out to the world. They are not locally supervenient.

But what of White’s unhappy subject, who is such that the electrical impulses to her brain switch back and forth (seamlessly) between the real world and an artificial source? “Suppose it does so in such a way that [she] has no idea that such switches are taking place. And suppose that when [she] is told about the switches, [she] has no idea when or how often they occur.” Well, imagine a subject who is teleported back and forth (seamlessly) between Earth and Inverted Earth, from babyhood on. What is the extension of her predicate “blue”? Does she speak Earth English or Inverted Earth English? It seems obvious that there is no fact of the matter in this case. But it does not follow that there is no fact of the matter in the case of a subject normally brought up in a definite language community. Frege’s constraint should not be interpreted as a guarantee that what Cavell famously called “the truth, or what I might call the moral of skepticism”⁷ can be refuted. And if it isn’t so interpreted, I see no difficulty here for global skepticism or non-reductive naturalism.

⁷ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1979, p. 241.